

Contemporary Art and the Politics of Aesthetics

Jacques Rancière

I do not take the phrase “community of sense” to mean a collectivity shaped by some common feeling. I understand it as a frame of visibility and intelligibility that puts things or practices together under the same meaning, which shapes thereby a certain sense of community. A community of sense is a certain cutting out of space and time that binds together practices, forms of visibility, and patterns of intelligibility. I call this cutting out and this linkage a partition of the sensible.

There is art insofar as the products of a number of techniques, such as painting, performing, dancing, playing music, and so on are grasped in a specific form of visibility that puts them in common and frames, out of their linkage, a specific sense of community. Humanity has known sculptors, dancers, or musicians for thousands of years. It has only known Art as such – in the singular and with a capital – for two centuries. It has known it as a certain partitioning of space. First off, Art is not made of paintings, poems, or melodies. Above all, it is made of some spatial setting, such as the theater, the monument, or the museum. Discussions on contemporary art are not about the comparative value of works. They are all about matters of spatialization: about having video monitors standing in for sculptures or motley collections of items scattered on the floor instead of having paintings hanging on the wall. They are about the sense of presence conveyed by the pictorial frame and the sense of absence conveyed by the screen that takes its place. This discussion deals with distributions of things on a wall or on a floor, in a frame or on a screen. It deals with the sense of the common that is at stake in those shifts between one spatial setting and another, or between presence and absence.

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A material partition is always at the same time a symbolic partition. The theater or the museum shapes forms of coexistence and compatibility between something that is given and something that is not given. They shape forms of community between the visible and the intelligible or between presences and absences that are also forms of community, between the inside and the outside, and also between the sense of community built in their space and other senses of community framed in other spheres of experience. The relationship between art and politics is a relationship between two communities of sense. This means that art and politics are not two permanent realities about which we would have to discuss whether they must be interconnected or not. Art and politics, in fact, are contingent configurations of the common that may or may not exist. Just as there is not always art (though there is always music, sculpture, dance, and so on), there is not always politics (though there are always forms of power and consent). Politics exists in specific communities of sense. It exists as a dissensual supplement to the other forms of human gathering, as a polemical redistribution of objects and subjects, places and identities, spaces and times, visibilities and meanings. In this respect we can call it an "aesthetic activity" in a sense that has nothing to do with that incorporation of state power into a collective work of art, which Walter Benjamin named the aestheticization of politics.

Therefore, a relation between art and politics is a relation between two partitions of the sensible. It supposes that both terms are identified as such. In order to exist as such, art must be identified within a specific regime of identification binding together practices, forms of visibility, and patterns of intelligibility. The regime of identification under which art exists for us has a name. For two centuries it has been called aesthetics. The relationship between art and politics is more precisely a relationship between the aesthetics of politics and the politics of aesthetics. How can we understand this notion of the politics of aesthetics? This question hinges on a previous one: what do we understand by the name *aesthetics*? What kind of community of sense does this term define?

There is a well-known master narrative on this topic. According to that master narrative, known as the modernist paradigm, *aesthetics* means the constitution of a sphere of autonomy. It means that works of art are isolated in a world of their own, heterogeneous to the other spheres of experience. In this world, they are evaluated by inner norms of validity: through criteria of form, beauty, or truth to medium. From this, various conclusions could be drawn about the politicalness of art. First, artworks shape a world of pure beauty, which has no political relevance. Second, they frame a kind of ideal community, fostering fanciful dreams of communities of sense posited beyond political conflict. Third, they achieve in their own sphere the same autonomy that is at the core of the modern project and is pursued in democratic or revolutionary politics.

According to this narrative, the identification between art, autonomy, and modernity collapsed in the last decades of the twentieth century. It collapsed because new forms of social life and commodity culture, along with new techniques of production, reproduction, and communication, made it impossible to

maintain the boundary between artistic production and technological reproduction, autonomous artworks and forms of commodity culture, high art and low art. Such a blurring of the boundaries should have amounted to the “end of aesthetics.” That end was strongly argued in the eighties, for instance, in a book edited by Hal Foster and called *The Anti-Aesthetic*. Among the most significant essays collected in that book was an essay written by Douglas Crimp, “On the Museum’s Ruins.” The ruined “museum” was André Malraux’s “museum without walls.” Crimp’s demonstration rested on the analysis of the double use of photography in Malraux’s museum. On the one hand, the “museum without walls” was made possible only by photographic reproduction. Photography alone allowed a cameo to take up residence on the page next to a painted tondo and a sculpted relief, or allowed Malraux to compare a detail of a Rubens in Antwerp to a detail of a Michelangelo in Rome. It enabled the author to replace the empiricalness of the works by the presence of the “spirit of art.” Unfortunately, Crimp argued, Malraux made a fatal error. At the end of his volume, he admitted photographs no longer as reproductions of artworks but as artworks themselves. By so doing, he threw the homogenizing device that constituted the homogeneity of the museum back to its heterogeneity. Heterogeneity was reestablished at the core of the museum. Thereby, the hidden secret of the museum could be displayed in the open. This is what Robert Rauschenberg would do a few years later by silk-screening Diego Velázquez’s *Rokeby Venus* onto the surface of a canvas containing pictures of mosquitoes and a truck, or in the company of helicopters or water towers, or even atop a statue of George Washington and a car key. Through photography, the museum was spread across the surface of every work by Rauschenberg. Malraux’s dream had become Rauschenberg’s joke. Just a bit disturbing was the fact that Rauschenberg himself apparently did not get the joke and affirmed, in turn, Malraux’s old-fashioned faith in the treasury of the conscience of Man.

I think that we can make more of the disturbance if we ask the question: what did the demonstration demonstrate, exactly? If Malraux’s dream could become Rauschenberg’s joke, why not the reverse: could Rauschenberg’s joke become Malraux’s dream in turn? Indeed, this turnaround would appear a few years later: at the end of the eighties, the celebrated iconoclast filmmaker Jean-Luc Godard, praised as the archetype of postmodern practice, mixed everything with anything as he implemented his *Histoire(s) du cinéma*, the exact equivalent of Malraux’s paper museum.

Let us make the point: there is a contradiction in the “imaginary museum,” and that contradiction is testimony to a postmodern break only if you assume first that the museum equals homogeneity, that it is the temple devoted to the uniqueness of the work of art; second, that photography, on the contrary, means heterogeneity, that it means the triviality of infinite reproduction; third, that it is photography alone which allows us both to put cameos, Scythian plaques, and Michelangelo on the same pages and to put the *Rokeby Venus* on a canvas along with a car key or a water tower. If those three statements are proven true, you can conclude that the realization of the imaginary museum through the photographic means the

collapse of the museum as well, that it marks the triumph of a heterogeneity that shatters aesthetic homogeneity.

But how do we know that these points are all true? How do we know, first, that the museum means homogeneity and that it is devoted to the uniqueness and auratic solitude of the work of art? How do we know that this auratic solitude was fostered in nineteenth- and twentieth-century views of art? Let us trace the issue back to the time of the highest celebration of high Art, around 1830. At that time, G. W. F. Hegel's disciples published his *Lessons on Aesthetics*. At the same time, popular magazines such as the *Magasin Pittoresque* in France began to use lithographic reproductions in order to offer the treasures of world art to a broad readership. It is also at the same time that Honoré de Balzac published the first novel that he signed with his name, *The Wild Ass's Skin*. At the beginning of the novel, Raphael, the hero, enters the showrooms of a curiosity shop, and this is what he sees:

Crocodiles, apes and stuffed boas grinned at stained glass-windows, seemed to be about to snap at carved busts, to be running after lacquer-ware or to be clambering up chandeliers. A Sevres vase on which Madame Jaquetot had painted Napoleon was standing next to a sphinx dedicated to Sesostris.... Madame du Barry painted by Latour, with a star on her head, nude and enveloped in cloud, seemed to be conspicuously contemplating an Indian chibouk.... A pneumatic machine was poking out the eye of the Emperor Augustus, who remained majestic and unmoved. Several portraits of aldermen and Dutch burgomasters, insensible now as during their lifetime, rose above this chaos of antiques and cast a cold and disapproving glance at them.¹

The description looks like a perfect anticipation of Rauschenberg's Combine paintings. It frames a space of indistinction between the shop and the museum, the ethnographic museum and the art museum, works of art and everyday materials. No postmodern break is necessary in order to blur all those boundaries. Far from being shattered by it, aesthetics means precisely this blurring. If photography could help literature to achieve the imaginary museum, it is because literature had already blended on its pages what photography would later blend on canvas. It is this "literary past" of photography that appears when the combination of photography and painting turns the canvas into a "print."

This is the second point: how do we know that photography equals heterogeneity, infinite reproducibility, and the loss of the aura? The same year that Crimp published his essay, a significant essay on photography was published: Roland Barthes's *Camera Lucida*. In that essay, Barthes openly overturned the mainstream argument on photography. He made photography a testimony to uniqueness. And in the following years, photography, after having been taken as the artifact best fitted for postmodern collage, would be viewed as a sort of symbol of Saint Veronica, an icon of pure and unique presence.

This means that the argument could be overturned. The museum means homogeneity and heterogeneity at once. Photography means reproducibility and

uniqueness as well. Photographic reproducibility does not make for a new community of sense by its own power. It has to be grasped within a wider form of visibility and a wider plot of intelligibility. It has to lend its possibilities to the enhancement or debasement of a form of presence, or a procedure of meaning. Rauschenberg's use of photography does not open a new age of art. It only gives additional evidence against the modernist identification of "flatness" with autonomous art and the self-containment of painting. It highlights what a reader of Stéphane Mallarmé's "pure" poetry already knows: flatness does not mean the specificity of a medium; it means a surface of exchange; exchange between the time of the poem and the drawing of a line in the space; between act and form; text and drawing or dance; pure art and decorative art; works of art and objects or performances belonging to individual or collective life.

If the production of new evidence against the Greenbergian paradigm of flatness could be viewed as the closure of an era, it is obviously for another reason. It is because there was a definite politics of aesthetics at work in that "formal" paradigm: that politics entrusted the autonomous work with a promise of political freedom and equality, compromised by another politics of aesthetics, the one which gave to art the task of suppressing itself in the creation of new forms of collective life.

The point is that the radicality of "artistic autonomy" is part of a wider plot linking aesthetic autonomy with some sort of political – or rather metapolitical – implementation of community. Aesthetics – I mean the aesthetic regime of the identification of Art – entails a politics of its own. But that politics divides itself into two competing possibilities, two politics of aesthetics, which also means two communities of sense.

As is well known, aesthetics was born at the time of the French Revolution, and it was bound up with equality from the very beginning. But the point is that it was bound up with two competing forms of equality. On the one hand, aesthetics meant the collapse of the system of constraints and hierarchies that constituted the representational regime of art. It meant the dismissal of the hierarchies of subject matters, genres, and forms of expression separating objects worthy or unworthy of entering in the realm of art or of separating high genres and low genres. It implied the infinite openness of the field of art, which ultimately meant the erasure of the frontier between art and non-art, between artistic creation and anonymous life. The aesthetic regime of art did not begin – as many theorists still have it – with the glorification of the unique genius producing the unique work of art. On the contrary, it began, in the eighteenth century, with the assertion that the archetypal poet, Homer, had never existed, that his poems were not a work of art, not the fulfillment of any artistic canon, but a patchwork of collected tales that expressed the way of feeling and thinking of a still-infant people.

On the one hand, therefore, aesthetics meant that kind of equality that went along with the beheading of the King of France and the sovereignty of the people. Now, that kind of equality ultimately meant the indiscernibility of art and life. On the other hand, aesthetics meant that works of art were grasped, as such, in a

specific sphere of experience where – in Kantian terms – they were free from the forms of sensory connection proper either to the objects of knowledge or to the objects of desire. They were merely “free appearance” responding to a free play, meaning a nonhierarchical relation between the intellectual and the sensory faculties. In his *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man*, Friedrich Schiller drew the political consequence of that dehierarchization. The “aesthetic state” defined a sphere of sensory equality where the supremacy of active understanding over passive sensibility was no longer valid. This meant that it dismissed the partition of the sensible that traditionally gave its legitimacy to domination by separating two humanities. The power of the high classes was supposed to be the power of activity over passivity, of understanding over sensation, of the educated senses over the raw senses, and so on. By relinquishing that power, aesthetic experience framed an equality that would be a reversal of domination. Schiller opposed that sensory revolution to political revolution as implemented in the French Revolution. The latter had failed precisely because the revolutionary power had played the traditional part of the understanding – meaning the state – imposing its law upon the matter of sensations – meaning the masses. The only true revolution would be a revolution overthrowing the power of active understanding over passive sensibility, the power of a class of intelligence and activity over a class of passivity and inchoateness.

So aesthetics meant equality because it meant the suppression of the boundaries of art. And it meant equality because it meant the constitution of Art as a separate form of human experience. These two equalities are opposed, but they are also tied together. In Schiller’s *Letters*, the statue of the Greek goddess promises a future of emancipation because the goddess is “idle” and “self contained.” It promises this owing to its very separateness and unavailability to our knowledge and desires. But at the same time, the statue promises this because its “freedom” – or “indifference” – embodies another freedom or indifference, the freedom of the Greek people who created it.² Now, this freedom means the opposite of the first one. It is the freedom of a life that, according to Schiller, does not rend itself into separate, differentiated forms of existence, the freedom of a people for whom art is the same as religion, which is the same as politics, which is the same as ethics: a way of being together. As a consequence, artwork’s separateness promises the opposite: a life that will not know art as a separate practice and field of experience. The politics of aesthetics rests on this originary paradox. That paradoxical linkage of two opposite equalities could make, and did historically make, for two main forms of politics.

The first form aims at connecting the two equalities. “Community of sense” thus means that the kind of equality and freedom that is experienced in aesthetic experience has to be turned into the community’s very form of existence: a form of a collective existence that will no longer be a matter of form and appearance but will rather be embodied in living attitudes, in the materiality of everyday sensory experience. The *common* of the community will thus be woven into the fabric of the lived world. This means that the separateness of aesthetic equality and freedom has to be achieved by its self-suppression. It has to be achieved in an inseparable form of

common life where art and politics, work and leisure, public and private life are the same. Such is the program of the aesthetic revolution, achieving in real life what both political dissensus and aesthetic enjoyment can only achieve in appearance. This program was first stated two centuries ago in "The Oldest Systematic Program of German Idealism," proposing to replace the dead mechanism of state power with the living body of a people animated by a philosophy turned into mythology. It was continuously revived, in the projects of both a revolution conceived as a "human revolution" (meaning the self-suppression of politics) and an art suppressing itself as a separate practice, identifying itself with the elaboration of new forms of life. It animated the gothic dreams of Arts and Crafts in nineteenth-century England, as well as the technological achievements of the Werkbund or the Bauhaus in twentieth-century Germany, the Mallarmean dream of a poetry "preparing the festivals of the future," as well as the concrete participation of the suprematist, futurist, and constructivist artists in the Soviet revolution. It animated the projects of situationist architecture, as well as Guy Debord's *dérive* or Joseph Beuys's "social plastic." I think that it is still alive in Michael Hardt's and Antonio Negri's contemporary visions of the Franciscan communism of the multitudes, implemented through the irresistible power of the global network exploding the boundaries of Empire. In all these cases, politics and art must achieve their self-suppression to the benefit of a new form of inseparable life.

The second form, on the contrary, disconnects the two equalities. It disconnects the free and equal space of aesthetic experience from the infinite field of equivalence of art and life. It stages the issue of communities of sense as an irreducible opposition between two communities of sense, both of which are communities of connection and disconnection. On the one side there is the community of lived experience, meaning the community of alienated life. This community is based on the originary separation of sense (sensation) and sense (meaning). In Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno's narrative, this is the separation of Ulysses's reason from both the songs of the sirens and the work of sailing.³ That community of alienated life is achieved in the deceptive appearance of its opposite. It is achieved in the homogeneous appearance of aestheticized life and commodity culture. In contrast to that faked equality and faked community of sense stands the community framed by the autonomy of aesthetic experience, by its heterogeneity to all other forms of experience. The standard modernist paradigm is only a partial and superficial interpretation of that community, forgetful of its political content. The political act of art is to save the heterogeneous sensible that is the heart of the autonomy of art and its power of emancipation. The community of sense at work in that politics of aesthetics is a community based on both the connection and disconnection of sense and sense. Its separateness "makes sense" to the extent that it is not the refuge of pure form. Instead, it stages the very relationship of separateness and inseparateness. The autonomous perfection of the work has to disclose its own contradiction, to make the mark of alienation appear in the appearance of reconciliation. It reconciles the reason of Ulysses with the song of the sirens, and it keeps them irreconcilable at the same time.

What is at stake in this politics is not so much preserving the boundary between high art and low or popular art as it is preserving the heterogeneity of two worlds of "sense" as such. This is why postmodernist polemicists miss the target if they think that the modernist paradigm of "politicity" collapsed when Rauschenberg put together a copy of Velázquez and a car key on the same canvas. The paradigm is threatened only if the boundary separating the two worlds of sense collapses. Adorno once made the tremendous assertion that we can no more hear – no more stand – some chords of nineteenth-century salon music, unless, he said, everything is trickery. Jean-François Lyotard would say, in turn, that you cannot blend figurative and abstract motifs on a canvas; that the taste that feels and appreciates this mix-up is no taste. As we know, it sometimes appears that those chords can still be heard, that you can still see figurative and abstract motifs blended on the same canvas, and even make art by merely borrowing artifacts from everyday life and reexhibiting them. But this marks no radical shift from modernity to postmodernity. The paradigm is not shattered by that revelation. It is led into a kind of headlong flight. It has to reassert the radical heterogeneity of sensory experience, at the cost not only of precluding any political community of sense but also of suppressing the autonomy of art itself, of transforming it into sheer ethical testimony. This shift is most clear in the French aesthetic thought of the eighties. Roland Barthes opposes the uniqueness of the photograph of the dead mother not only to the interpretive practice of the semiologist but also to the artistic pretension of photography itself. Godard emphasizes the iconic power of the image or the rhythm of the phrase at the cost of dismantling not only the old narrative plot but also the autonomy of the artwork itself. In Lyotard, the brush stroke or the timbre becomes sheer testimony to the mind's enslavement by the power of the other. The first name of the other is the *aistheton*. The second is the law. Ultimately, both politics and aesthetics vanish in ethics. This reversal of the modernist paradigm of the politicized art is in keeping with a whole trend of thought that dissolves political dissensus in an archipolitics of exception and terror from which only a Heideggerian God can save us.

I quite hastily sketched these two communities of sense in order to remind us of the following: the project of politicizing art – for instance, in the form of a critical art – is always anticipated by the forms of politicized art entailed in the forms of visibility and intelligibility that make art identifiable as such. We identify art in the interplay of the two forms of equality attached to its separateness and to its inseparateness. We identify it through the dialectic of its autonomy and its heteronomy. What does it mean, subsequently, to do political or critical art, or to take a political view of art? It means locating its power in a specific negotiation of the relation between the two aesthetic forms of equality. A critical art is, in fact, a sort of third way between the two politics of aesthetics.

This negotiation must keep something of the tension that pushes aesthetic experience toward the reconfiguration of collective life and something of the tension that withdraws the power of aesthetic sensoriality from the other spheres of experience. From the zones of indistinction between art and life it must borrow

the connections that provoke political intelligibility. And from the separateness of artworks it must borrow the sense of sensory foreignness that enhances political energies. Political art must be some sort of collage of these opposites. Collage, in the widest sense of the term, is the major procedure of critical art, of that “third politics” that has to weave its way between the two politics of aesthetics. Before blending Velázquez and car keys, collage blends alternative politics of aesthetics and offers the product of that negotiation to wavering forms of intelligibility, fostering wavering forms of politicality. It frames little communities of sense, little communities of elements borrowed from heterogeneous spheres. It sets up specific forms of heterogeneity, by taking up elements from different spheres of experience and forms of montage from different arts or techniques. If Brecht remained a kind of archetype for political art in the twentieth century, it was due not so much to his enduring communist commitment as to the way he negotiated the relation between these opposites, blending the scholastic forms of political teaching with the enjoyments of the musical or the cabaret or discussing allegories of Nazi power in verse about cauliflowers. The main procedure of political or critical art consists in setting out the encounter, and possibly the clash, of heterogeneous elements. The clash of these heterogeneous elements is supposed to provoke a break in our perception, to disclose some secret connection of things hidden behind everyday reality. This hidden reality may be the absolute power of dream and desire concealed by the prose of bourgeois life, as it is in the surrealist poetics. It may be the violence of capitalist power and class war hidden behind great ideals, as it is in the militant practices of John Heartfield’s photomontage, showing us for instance the capitalist gold caught in Adolf Hitler’s throat.

Political art thus means creating those forms of dialectical collision or dissensus that put together not only heterogeneous elements but also two politics of sensoriality. The heterogeneous elements are put together in order to provoke a clash. Now, the clash is two things at once. On the one hand, it is the flash that enlightens. The connection of the heterogeneous elements speaks out of its legibility. It points to some secret of power and violence. The connection of vegetables and high rhetorics in Brecht’s *Arturo Ui* conveys a political message. But on the other hand, the clash is produced insofar as the heterogeneity of the elements resists the homogeneity of meaning. Cauliflowers remain cauliflowers, juxtaposed to high rhetorics. They carry no message. They are supposed to enhance political energy out of their very opaqueness. Ultimately, the mere juxtaposition of heteroclitic elements is endowed with a political power. In Godard’s film *Made in USA* the hero says, “I get the impression of being in a film of Walt Disney, played by Humphrey Bogart, therefore in a political film.” The mere relationship of heteroclitic elements appears, thus, as a dialectical clash playing witness to a political reality of conflict.

Political art is a kind of negotiation, not between politics and art, but between the two politics of aesthetics. This third way is made possible by continuously playing on the boundary and the absence of boundary between art and non-art. The Brechtian identity of allegory and of the debunking of allegory supposes that you can play on the connection and the disconnection between art and cauliflowers,

politics and cauliflowers. Such a play supposes that vegetables themselves have a double existence: one in which they bear no relation to art and politics and another where they already bear a strong relation to both of them. The relations of politics, art, and vegetables existed before Brecht, not only in impressionist still lifes, reviving the Dutch tradition, but also in literature. One novel by Emile Zola, *Le ventre de Paris*, had notably used them as both political and artistic symbols. The novel is based on the polarity of two characters. On the one hand, there is the poor old revolutionary who comes back from deportation to the new Paris of Les Halles, where he is overcome by the flood of cabbages – meaning the flood of consumption. On the other hand, there is the impressionist painter, singing the epics of the cabbages, the epic of modernity, the glass and iron architecture of Les Halles, and the piles of vegetables that allegorized modern beauty in contrast to the old pathetic beauty symbolized by the Gothic church nearby. The political allegory of the cauliflowers was possible because the connection of art, politics, and vegetables – the connection of art, politics, and consumption – already existed as set of moving borders, enabling artists to both cross the border and make sense of the connection of the heterogeneous elements and play on the sensory power of their heterogeneity.

This means that the mixing of high art and low art, or the mixing of art and commodity, is not a discovery of the sixties, which would have both realized and undermined modern art and its political potential. On the contrary, political art had already been made possible by that mixing, by a continuous process of border crossings between high and low art, art and non-art, art and the commodity. This process reaches back far in the past of the aesthetic regime of art. You cannot oppose an epoch of the celebration of high art to an epoch of the trivialization or parody of high art. As soon as art was constituted as a specific sphere of existence, at the beginning of the nineteenth century, its products began to fall into the triviality of reproduction, commerce, and commodity. But as soon as they did so, commodities themselves began to travel in opposite directions – to enter the realm of art. Their power was directly identified with the overwhelming power and beauty of modern life, as happened in Zola's epics of cabbages. They could also fall into the realm of art by becoming obsolete, unavailable for consumption, and thereby turned into objects of aesthetic – disinterested – pleasure or uncanny excitement. Surrealist poetics, as well as Benjamin's theory of allegory or Brecht's epic theater, thrived on this border crossing. And so too did all the forms of critical art that played on the ambiguous relationship of art and commerce, right through to many contemporary installations. They blend heterogeneous materials borrowed from artistic tradition, political rhetoric, commodity culture, commercial ads, and so on, in order to disclose the connections of high art or politics with capitalist domination. But they could do so owing to the ongoing processes that had already erased these borders. Critical art thrived on this continuous border crossing, this two-way process of prosaification of the poetical and of poeticization of the prosaic.

If this makes sense, it may be possible to reframe, hopefully on a firmer footing, the political issues involved in the discussion about modernism and

postmodernism. What is at stake in contemporary art is not the fate of the modernist paradigm. Its validity is neither weaker nor stronger than before. In my view, it always was a very restrictive interpretation of the dialectic of the aesthetic regime of art. What is at stake is the fate of the third politics of aesthetics. The question is not: are we still modern, already postmodern, or even post-postmodern? The question is: What exactly happened to the dialectical clash? What happened to the formula of critical art? I shall propose some elements for a possible answer with reference to exhibitions which, in the last few years, offered points of comparison with the art of the sixties or seventies, and thereby some significant markers of the shift.

First example: three years ago, the National Center for Photography in Paris presented an exhibition called *Bruit de fond*. The exhibition juxtaposed recent works and works from the seventies. Among the latter you could see Martha Rosler's series "Bringing the War Home," photomontages that bring together advertising images of American domestic happiness and images of the war in Vietnam. Nearby, there was another work related to American politics, taking the same form of a confrontation of two elements. The work *Les temps du monde*, made by Wang Du, consisted of two objects. On the left, there was the Clinton couple, represented in the pop manner, as a pair of wax-museum figures. On the right, there was a huge sculpture of Courbet's *Origine du monde*, which, as is well known, represents a woman's sex. So in both cases an image of American happiness was juxtaposed with its hidden secret: war and economical violence in Martha Rosler, sex and profanity in Wang Du. But in Wang Du's case, both political conflictuality and the sense of strangeness had vanished. What remained was an automatic effect of delegitimization: sexual profanity delegitimizing politics, the wax figure delegitimizing high art. But there was no longer anything to delegitimize. The mechanism spun around itself. It played, in fact, a double play: on the automaticness of the delegitimizing effect and on the awareness of its spinning around itself.

Second example: another exhibition shown in Paris three years ago was called *Voilà: Le monde dans la tête*. It proposed to document a century through different installations, among them Christian Boltanski's installation *Les abonnés du téléphone*. The principle of this installation is simple: there are two shelves on either side of the gallery with phone directories from all over the world, and two tables between them where you can sit down and peruse whatever directory you like. This installation could remind us of another political work of the nineties, Chris Burden's piece *The Other Vietnam Memorial*. That "other memorial" is, of course, the memorial for the anonymous Vietnamese victims. Chris Burden had chosen the names written on the memorial by randomly picking out Vietnamese names in a phone directory. Boltanski's installation still deals with a matter of anonymity. But that anonymity is not further embedded in a controversial plot. It is no longer a matter of giving names to those that the winners had left unnamed. The names of the anonymous become, as Boltanski puts it, "specimens of humanity."

Third example: in 2003, the Guggenheim Museum in New York presented an exhibition called *Moving Pictures*. The purpose was to illustrate how the extensive

use of reproducible media in contemporary art was rooted in the critical art practices of the sixties and the seventies, questioning both mainstream social or sexual stereotypes and artistic autonomy. Nevertheless, the works exhibited around the rotunda illustrated a significant shift away from that straight line. For instance, Vanessa Beecroft's video showing nude women standing in the setting of the museum was still put forward as a critique of feminine stereotypes in art. But obviously those nude and mute bodies followed another direction, escaping any signification or conflict of significations, evoking Giorgio de Chirico's metaphysical painting much more than any kind of feminist critique. As you climbed up the round ramp of the Guggenheim, many videos, photographs, installations, and video installations enhanced, instead of critiqued, a new kind of strangeness, a sense of the mystery entailed in the trivial representation of everyday life. You sensed it in Rinke Dijkstra's photographs of ambiguous teenagers, as well as in Gregory Crewdson's movielike representations of the strangeness of everyday events, or in the Christian Boltanski installation included there, one composed of photographs, electric fixtures, and bulbs, which may symbolize – according to the piece – either the dead of the Holocaust or the fleetingness of childhood. At the top of the exhibition there was a kind of backtrack from the dialectical art of the dash to the symbolist art of mystery as it culminated in the video installation made by Bill Viola, *Going Forth by Day*, composed as a cycle of frescoes, embracing the cycles of birth, life, death, and resurrection, as well as the cycle of fire, air, earth, and water.

Out of those three examples, chosen among many possible others, we can sketch out an answer to the question of the politics of aesthetics today: what happened to the dissensual forms of critical art? I would say that the dialectical form of the aesthetic dissensus has split up into four main forms.

The first one would be the *joke*. In the joke, the conjunction of the heterogeneous elements is still staged as a tension or polarity, pointing to some secret, but there is no more secret. The dialectical tension is brought back as a game, played on the very indiscernability between procedures that unveil secrets of power, on the one hand, and the ordinary procedures of delegitimization that are parts of the new forms of domination, on the other: the procedures of delegitimization produced by power itself, by the media, commercial entertainment, or advertising. Such was the case of the work of Wang Du that I mentioned earlier. Many exhibitions today play on the same undecidability. For instance, an exhibition was presented at Minneapolis under the popesque title *Let's Entertain* before being recycled in Paris under the situationist title *Beyond the Spectacle*. This exhibition played on three levels: the pop art derision of high art, the critical denunciation of capitalist entertainment, and the Debordian idea of play as the opposite of spectacle.

The second one would be the *collection*. In the collection, heterogeneous elements are still lumped together, but they are no longer gathered in order to provoke a critical clash, nor even to play on the undecidability of their critical power. They become a positive attempt at collecting the traces and testimonies of

a common world and a common history. The collection is a recollection as well. The equality of all items – works of art, private photographs, objects of use, ads, commercial videos – is thereby made into the equality of the archivistic traces of the life of a community. I mentioned the exhibition *Voilà: Le monde dans la tête*, which sought to recollect a century. When you left Boltanski's room, you could see, for instance, one hundred photographs made by Hans-Peter Feldmann, representing one person of each age from one to one hundred, and many other installations likewise documenting a common history. We could find many other examples of this trend. It is obviously in tune with a motto that increasingly can be heard today: that we have "lost our world," that the "social bond" is being broken, and that the artists must take part in the struggle to mend the social bond or the social fabric by bringing to the fore all the traces bearing witnessing to a shared humanity.

The third form would be the *invitation*. I mentioned how *Les abonnés du téléphone* invited the visitors to take a directory on a shelf and open it randomly. Elsewhere in the same exhibition they were invited to take a book from a pile and sit down on a carpet, representing some sort of child's fairy island. In other exhibitions, visitors were invited to have some soup and get in touch with each other, to engage in new forms of relationships. Such attempts had previously been systematized through Nicolas Bourriaud's concept of relational aesthetics: an art creating no more works or objects, but rather ephemeral situations prompting new forms of relationships. As he puts it, by giving some small services, the artist contributes to the task of plugging the gaps in the social bonds.⁴

The fourth form would be *mystery*. Mystery does not mean enigma, nor does it mean mysticness. Since the age of Mallarmé, it means a specific way of putting heterogeneous elements together: for instance, in the case of Mallarmé, the thought of the poet, the steps of the dancer, the unfolding of a fan, or the smoke of a cigarette. In opposition to the dialectical clash that stresses the heterogeneity of the elements in order to show a reality framed by antagonisms, mystery sets forth an analogy – a familiarity of the strange, witnessing to a common world – where heterogeneous realities are woven in the same fabric and can always be related to one another by the fraternity of a metaphor.

"Mystery" and the "fraternity of metaphors" are two terms used by Jean-Luc Godard in his *Histoires du cinéma*. This work is an interesting case in point because Godard uses collages of heterogeneous elements as he has always done, but he makes them produce exactly the contrary meaning of what they did twenty years before. For instance, in a striking passage in the *Histoires du cinéma*, Godard fuses together three images: first, shots from George Stevens's film *A Place in the Sun* showing the happiness of the young and rich lover played by Elizabeth Taylor, bathing in the sun, beside her beloved Montgomery Clift; second, images of the dead in Ravensbrück, filmed some years before by the same George Stevens; and third, a Mary Magdalene taken from Giotto's frescoes in Padua. If it had been made twenty years ago, this collage could only have been understood as a dialectical clash, denouncing the secret of death hidden behind both high art and American

happiness. But in the *Histoires du cinéma*, the image of denunciation is turned into an image of redemption. The conjunction of the images of Nazi extermination, American happiness, and Giotto's "ahistorical" art bears witness to the redeeming power of images, which gives to the living and the dead "a place in the world." The dialectic clash has become a mystery of copresence. Mystery was the key concept of symbolism. The return of symbolism is obviously on the agenda. When I use this term, I am not referring to the spectacular forms of revival of symbolist mythology and the dream of the Gesamtkunstwerk, as in the work of Matthew Barney. Nor do I refer only to the effective uses of symbolism such as the work by Viola that I mentioned earlier. I am referring to the more modest, almost imperceptible way in which the collections of objects, images, and signs gathered in our museums and galleries are increasingly shifting from the logic of dissensus to the logic of the mystery, to a testimony of co-presence.

The shift from dialectics to symbolism is obviously linked to the contemporary shift in what I called the aesthetics of politics, meaning the way politics frames a common stage. This shift has a name. Its name is consensus. Consensus does not simply mean the agreement of the political parties or of social partners on the common interests of the community. It means a reconfiguration of the visibility of the common. It means that the givens of any collective situation are objectified in such a way that they can no longer lend themselves to a dispute, to the polemical framing of a controversial world within the given world. In such a way, consensus properly means the dismissal of the "aesthetics of politics."

Such an erasure or a weakening of the political stage and of the political invention of dissensus has a contradictory effect on the politics of aesthetics. On the one hand, it gives a new visibility to the practices of art as political practices – I mean practices of the redistribution of spaces and times, of forms of visibility of the common, forms of connections between things, images, and meanings. Artistic performances may appear, and sometimes do appear, thereby as the substitutes of politics in the construction of dissensual stages. But consensus does not merely leave the political place empty. It reframes, in its own way, the field of its objects. It also shapes, in its own way, the space and tasks of artistic practice. For instance, by replacing matters of class conflict with matters of inclusion and exclusion, it puts worries about the "loss of the social bond," concerns with "bare humanity," or tasks of empowering threatened identities in the place of political concerns. Art is summoned thus to put its political potentials to work in reframing a sense of community and mending the social bond. In my view, the shift from the critical paradigm onto the forms of the joke, the collection, the invitation, and the mystery testify to that reconfiguration of the political in the form of the ethical.

Against the substitution, in art, of ethics for politics, certain projects today do seek a political role for art. These address matters of the distribution of spaces and issues of redescriptions of situations. It is more and more about matters that traditionally belonged to politics. This situation has led to new attempts to make art directly political. In recent years many artists have set out to revive the project of an art that makes real objects instead of producing or recycling images, or that

undertakes real actions in the real world rather than merely “artistic” installations. Political commitment thus is equated with the search for the real. But the political is not the “outside” of a “real” that art would have to reach. The “outward” is always the other side of an “inward.” What produces their difference is the topography in whose frame the relation of in and out is negotiated. The real as such simply does not exist. What does exist is a framing or a fiction of reality. Art does not do politics by reaching the real. It does it by inventing fictions that challenge the existing distribution of the real and the fictional.

Making fictions does not mean telling stories. It means undoing and rearticulating the connections between signs and images, images and times, or signs and space that frame the existing sense of reality. Fiction invents new communities of sense: that is to say, new trajectories between what can be seen, what can be said, and what can be done. It blurs over the distribution of places and competences, which also means that it blurs over the very borders defining its own activity; doing art means displacing the borders of art, just as doing politics means displacing the borders of what is recognized as the sphere of the political. It is no coincidence that some of the most interesting artworks today engage with matters of territories and borders. What could be the ultimate paradox of the politics of aesthetics is that perhaps by inventing new forms of aesthetic distance or indifference, art today can help frame, against the consensus, new political communities of sense. Art cannot merely occupy the space left by the weakening of political conflict. It has to reshape it, at the risk of testing the limits of its own politics.

Notes

- Balzac, *The Wild Ass's Skin*, 15.
- 2 Schiller, *On the Aesthetic Education of Man*, 109.
- 3 Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*.
- 4 Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*.